

Canadian-Iranian restaurateur calls for peace



By Chris Houston

News from Iran has dominated headlines since Israel's surprise military attack on June 13. The United States' military strikes on three Iranian nuclear sites followed on June 22, before a ceasefire was declared on June 23.

On June 27, Bancroft This Week interviewed local restaurateur Natasha Kasmai Alves. Kasmai Alves is the co-owner of For the Halibut Fish and Chips restaurant in Bancroft. She was born in Iran's capital city of Tehran, and much of her family still live there. In an extensive interview, Kasmai Alves spoke about her upbringing, her thoughts on the Israel-Iran War and the need for more dialogue and peace.

"I was born in Iran, in Tehran to be specific, in 1980, of all times, when the revolution was happening," Kasmai Alves told Bancroft This Week. Almost three decades prior, the United States and the United Kingdom had backed a coup d'etat to overthrow Iran's democratically elected government.

The 1979 revolution saw an uprising against the Western-aligned government of Iran, which had governed over times of economic and social chaos. During the revolution the pro-Western secular government was replaced with an authoritarian anti-Western Islamic republic. Like many others, Kasmai Alves' parents left the country, migrating to Canada in 1991.

Kasmai Alves recalled family stories, from before her birth, of a secular nation, where youth would attend music concerts and travel

to Europe for education. During these times, wealth inequality rose, support for the government reduced, and protests began. The Revolutionary Council promised Iranians a better life, as Kasmai Alves said, 'promises of freedom, of wealth, of wealth sharing, of better taxes and saving money and making our country great again.'

The revolution, as Kasmai Alves described 'is what, to some extent, people wanted. Or what they thought they wanted. But then things got out of hand.' She spoke of how the new government ramped up their grip on social matters, 'by the time I came around, they were determining what you could name your child.'

Kasmai Alves also shared stories from her parents of the Iranian government clamping down on religious freedom, and started mandating the display of religious scripture. She recalls the religious police terrifying her mother while driving to work. A professor at the University of Tehran, Kasmai Alves' mother received a stern warning for the crime of wearing red nail polish. 'I remember the fear I felt in the back of this car, while my mother was being interrogated and told she is not a good muslim, and should be ashamed of herself. And on a side note, my mom was Russian Orthodox.'

Kasmai Alves describes how the revolutionary police used fear to control the population: 'I have very vivid memories of being on a school bus and passing where they would do public hangings'I don't know what their crimes were, but the fact that this was done in public was horrifying. It's something that leaves a very deep scar in us as a nation, as a people.'

Fear was also an emotion that Kasmai Alves felt in recent weeks, when Israel launched its surprise attacks on Iran. 'My initial reaction was anger,' Kasmai Alves described her anger towards the Israeli leadership for their choice to use violence. She recalled the tension in the family group chat after bombs fell. Some of her family fled to Iran's north, as the Iranian government cut the internet causing her to wait for days before learning their fate.

Kasmai Alves described her urge 'set that anger aside'in an effort to understand and move forward.' She quoted her father, who told her that people can push for change when they feel unheard by their governments, and when the change comes, it is more violent than they expected, but then it is too late to change the political leadership. Kasmai Alves clarified that she was talking about trends in the United States, Israel and Iran. She was keen to differentiate between her disdain for governments from any ill-feeling to the people from any nation. She praised the people in all three countries who push for peace and dialogue.

Kasmai Alves is sympathetic to impoverished people who join or are conscripted into militaries, leaving the blame for violence squarely on politicians. 'Ultimately, governments start wars, people suffer through wars.' She was critical of the Iranian government, and remembers her parents having to 'unbrainwashing her' when she came home from school after being subjected to hateful messages against Israel and Western nations.

Kasmai Alves is critical also of social media platforms for stoking hatred, amplifying extreme views, and serving people polarising content. She lambasts the flow of videos that emphasize pro-war voices. 'If you are seeing just this, it would be very easy to get angry and riled up' she said, before calling for more conversations, especially between people of different cultural backgrounds and faiths.

Kasmai Alves recalls feeling devastated when she saw footage of the missiles landing in Iran. 'The sound of the missiles is something that will haunt me for the rest of my life. It took her back to her childhood 'My experience of war was hiding when the missiles went off. My experience was being sent to northern Iran with grandparents because they had to work and not knowing if I was going to see them again. As a six or seven year old child, that was traumatic. As a parent, I cannot imagine the emotional weight of having to separate yourself from your child in the hope that they will stay safe, and not knowing if they are going to come home.'

Kasmai Alves recalled her disdain of violence from her youth. She recalls the visceral impacts of war on people: 'the fear, uncertainty, grief, that hits people. And I've heard that people say 'yeah, strike back' and that breaks my heart. It breaks my heart because I know they are saying they are striking specific places, and I know there are families on the other side. And there is nothing that can justify that for me. And there's nothing that can justify the Iranian, or American or Israeli actions.'

Kasmaii Alves was critical of American talk of bombing Iran to cause regime change. "We're not in support of the government, but we don't want to be bombed," she said before mentioning the Woman, Life, Freedom movement. The protest movement calls for the overthrow of the government and more rights for women.

Kasmaii Alves returned to her emotions on the day of the airstrikes in Iran, and her fear waiting to hear the news. In the end, Kasmaii Alves learned that her family were all unharmed. No lives were lost in the U.S. military strikes. In the ten days of fighting between 13 and 23 June, Israel reported 29 fatalities, Iran reported 610. Both countries have reported thousands of injuries.

Kasmaii Alves invites people to relinquish support for any government that wishes to harm any people. She advises people to have more conversations with individual people in Israel, in Iran and in the United States: "have a conversation before you take any sides," she said. "You might find that everyone is looking to live in peace."